



Don't Get Ripped Off Before You Take Off

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MADISON – With summer vacation around the bend, Wisconsin consumers may be looking to save money on travel expenses by renting a vacation property from an online classified ad or by responding to an offer of a free vacation. The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) asks consumers planning a vacation to be on the lookout for “too-good-to-be-true” travel and rental deals and to be skeptical of their claims.

“Watch out for fake property rental postings on online classified sites, as well as unsolicited calls or emails promising free or low-cost vacations,” said Sandy Chalmers, Division Administrator for Trade and Consumer Protection. “Though it may sound like an unbelievably great deal, it’s most likely a scam.”

Travel-related scams are a big business nationwide. Last summer, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) announced an international sweep to stop fraudulent operations involving timeshare resale services and travel prizes. The sweep involved 191 actions including three FTC cases, 83 civil actions brought by 28 states including Wisconsin, and 25 actions brought by law enforcement agencies in 10 other countries. In total, more than 180 individuals faced criminal prosecution in the sweep.

To protect themselves from travel fraud, vacation shoppers should look out for scam red flags including:

- You see a rental property advertised online, but the details are sketchy and the “owner” claims to be overseas. They ask for deposits by wire transfer or prepaid debit cards.
- You “won a free vacation,” but you have to pay some fees first. A legitimate company will not ask you to pay for a prize.
- A prize company wants your credit card number to “verify” your identity or your prize.
- You are offered free or discounted travel by robocall or an unsolicited call, text or email.

Consumers should also be on the lookout for high-pressure pitches for travel clubs. Travel clubs are paid membership-based companies that claim to offer significant discounts on travel opportunities. They often have high membership fees and complicated cancellation policies and provide questionable value for the money. In fact, the “deals” are often no better than what a shopper could find online or are so limited in their destination and travel date options that members cannot find a decent booking.

To safely shop for travel, consumers should:

- **Get recommendations from family and friends** about the companies they use and look online to see what people are saying about the companies’ services and prices.
- **Carefully research** vacation rentals you find in online ads. Request referrals for a property and search for reviews from satisfied customers. Also, run a web search on the address – if it is listed for sale, contact the realtor to check on the validity of the rental offer.
- **Book travel expenses by credit card** to have protections that are not available in cash or check transactions.
- **Watch out for “resort fees”** that add to the cost per night of your stay. Many people do not find out about the fees until they arrive at the hotel – or worse, when they check out.
- **Confirm all of the arrangements personally** if you use a travel company to book a vacation. Get the names, addresses and phone numbers of the airlines, car rental companies and hotels in the package and call each directly to verify your reservation.

For additional information or to file a complaint, visit the Consumer Protection Bureau at datcp.wisconsin.gov, send an e-mail to datcp hotline@wisconsin.gov or call the Consumer Information Hotline toll-free at 1-800-422-7128.

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